

Noise Pollution: A City Planning Problem

by {ga=tangotti}

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The city's Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) recently announced an updating of its regulations against noise and an enforcement blitz in 25 noisy neighborhoods. (See David Seifman, "The Noise Cops are Coming," New York Post, 9/8/03). Of all the things New Yorkers complain about, noise tops the list. We complain about loud music, cars, trucks, buses, construction, planes, and subway trains. Sometimes we just don't like to hear our neighbors talk, or we hate the music they listen to. The latest auditory annoyance is the scooter, which is illegal to operate in the first place but a great noisemaker for young people who want attention.

The city's incessant street noises aren't just annoying. They can cause temporary hearing loss, contribute to stress and sleep loss, and over a long period of time cause permanent damage to your health. Add to the toll taken by public noise are the many abuses of private noise, like the music machines that people wire themselves up to while plodding half consciously through the city's noisy streets.

Enforcement alone won't get rid of noise pollution. Parking tickets don't stop illegal parking, but only make it costlier. Sanitation tickets haven't stopped dumping. And it's going to be hard to stop noise pollution by depending only on enforcement of the laws. Especially with its reduced budget, the city will have trouble finding enough officers to crack down on all the city's auditory assaults. It might be cheaper to hand out earplugs or cell phones to everyone, but who wants to live in a city of spaced out zombies who bump into everyone else and are targets for cars and trucks?

Needed: A Sustainable Strategy

In the long run the basic problem is it to prevent noise before it occurs. This requires a strategy that goes after the sources of noise before they harm people, not after the fact. Despite the tireless efforts of many committed professionals that deal with the city's environmental regulations, city government has adopted no such plan. Slapping fines is a short-term tactic that doesn't rest on a strategy that can sustain a better environment in the long run.

To begin with, the city doesn't adequately regulate new development in a way that can create noise-free environments. The city's land use regulations require that any major new development that is subject to city's land use review procedure undergo an environmental assessment. This should consider potential noise levels produced by the development and the

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noise levels that the project's occupants are expected to experience. If it's found that the new development may have a negative impact on noise levels, the developer may volunteer to implement measures to reduce or counteract the noise. For example, if a new apartment building is on a busy avenue with heavy traffic, the developer will typically agree to put in triple-pane windows. But this just blocks the noise for some while everyone else on the street has to suffer the traffic noise.

The city's Zoning Resolution was designed to prevent certain types of noise-producing activities from locating near residents. But these regulations were made over forty years ago, before the onset of environmental regulations. A revamping of the zoning regulations is long overdue. The new regulations would, however, only affect new development because of the city's long-lasting practice of "grandfathering" for eternity development that is deemed to go against the public interest. Revised regulations would do little to address most of the city's current noise problems.

Street Noise

Thick windows and quiet neighbors in new apartments won't solve probably the biggest noise problem -- street noise. This requires another set of strategies to deal with the excessive volume of traffic on the streets. By improving the overall environment for people who walk, we can address the problems of noise, air pollution and safety, all of which are serious public health problems. Unfortunately, the city's traffic policy is mostly geared to moving more cars and trucks through the streets, which only creates more noise. It's really quite simple: less traffic, less noise and a better environment.

The benefits of traffic reduction would be especially great in congested areas like Midtown Manhattan, where fumes are furious and there's a honk a minute. Trucks and buses should have improved equipment to buffer noise. Truck deliveries could be limited to times of day when there are fewer pedestrians, a common practice in other cities around the world.

Subway Noise

Another of the city's noisiest sites is the subway. But enforcers from the Department of Environmental Protection can't slap violations on one of the city's biggest polluters, the

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Metropolitan Transit Authority. The MTA is one of those untouchable state authorities that seems to think first about satisfying its bondholders and keeping its hands in its customer's pockets. Over the last twenty years the MTA has dramatically improved track conditions, especially at busy stations, reducing many of the worst noise hazards. But frequent subway riders know all too well that they can still come out of the subway with their heads spinning from shrieking brakes at stations or screeching wheels at curves. MTA buses are also notoriously loud and polluting, and the authority further chooses to concentrate its bus garages in low-income communities like Harlem, where the sheer volume of bus traffic is enough to make neighbors scream.

Another big noise generator is air traffic. Neighborhoods around airports live daily with the noise and vibrations of planes taking off and landing.

In sum, the city's transportation system, both above and below ground, is the biggest contributor to noise pollution. It's time to focus not just on moving the greatest number of vehicles as fast as possible, but in moving them without endangering the physical and mental health of city residents and workers. Actually cars move far fewer people than public transit and pollute far more, so the benefits of traffic reduction are much greater. Our streets, sidewalks and subways are our most utilized public spaces, but we have no plan for improving the quality of life for the vast majority of people who pass through these spaces on foot. If the city really wants to address the quality of life in the noisiest neighborhoods, they'll have to do a lot more than send out the ticket-writers.

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